DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 128 770 CS 002 933

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TITLE A New Option in Adult Basic Education: The Adult Performance Level High School Diploma.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 5p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; Adult Literacy; *Basic Skills; Career Exploration; *Functional Illiteracy; *High School Equivalency Programs; Literacy Education; *Social Adjustment; Social Disadvantagement
IDENTIFIERS *Adult Performance Level; APL

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Adult Performance Level (APL) project, an alternative to external high school diplomas such as the General Educational Development (GED) test. Based on the need for "functional literacy" or "functional competency," the program teaches basic skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, communication, computation, problem solving, and interpersonal dynamics) and general knowledge in the areas of consumer economics, occupational awareness, health, community resources, and government and law. In addition, the program teaches specific coping skills appropriate to individual goals in one of three categories: occupational/vocational, advanced academic, or advanced specialization (such as homemaking). (KS)

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ED128770

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A NEW OPTION IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION: THE ADULT PERFORMANCE LEVEL HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

BY VICKI HENSLER

Adults who are interested in acquiring a high school diploma now have a new option along with taking courses for high school credit and the General Educational Development test (GED). An external high school diploma is beginning to be given in several places around the nation, based on something called "functional literacy" or "functional competency." These terms are used to denote the ability to use skills and knowledge with the functional competence needed for meeting the requirements of adult living. It is the application of a set of skills to a set of general knowledge areas which result from the requirements imposed upon members of society. This new option allows the educational system to specifically relate basic skills in such areas as reading or math of practical everyday problems. Occasionally, these skills are called "coping skills." A focus of this educational design is to assist adults in acquiring more success in daily living.

In 1971, the United States Office of Education funded a project known as the Adult Performance Level project (APL). This study is located at the University of Texas (Austin) and has two specific objectives - to define adult literacy in terms of actual competencies performed in everyday life tasks and to assess the competencies of adults (18-65 yrs.) in the United States. Presently, one more objective has been added to the original two: to design an APL program based on the defined task skills needed to be considered functionally competent. Such a curriculum has now been developed.

The APL objectives were developed by means of a series of steps including a literature survey; interviews of experts in education, business, and industry; health and transportation, as well as structured interviews of persons in the target population of the underemployed and undereducated, and the actual testing of adults across the nation.

This survey yielded shocking results. It appears that at least 20% of the adults in the nation function with difficulty. Those that cannot function successfully with minimal survival and life coping skills were typed APL 1's. Those that could function, but not proficiently were typed APL 2's and those adults who were functionally competent in basic activities required of adults in today's society were typed APL 3's.

The objectives defined as germane to adult competency encompass the basic skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, communication, computation, problem solving and interpersonal dynamics. The general knowledge areas these skills are directed to in the APL project are: consumer economics; occupational knowledge; health; community resources; and government and law.

In addition to meeting the standards described in the general knowledge areas, APL degree candidates must also meet specific coping skills in optional areas that are appropriate to their individual goals. The candidate has the choice of the following three categories: occupational/vocational (utilizing employer testimony, performance, or documentation); advanced academic (portfolio of education aims and means acceptable scoring on standardized college prediction tests); advanced specialization (judged by specialists such as homemaking skills).

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"By the time a person has progressed through the entire APL External High School Diploma Program, he will have demonstrayed (1) that he is functionally literate by scoring as an APL 3 on the APL competency tese or passing the mastery tests, (2) that he possesses the ability to operate as a member of society by virtue of having completed satisfactorily the Generalized Life Skills portion of program, and (3) that he has a marketable skill if he has passed through the occupational/vocational sequence of the Individualized Competency portion of the program or that he has the ability to function adequately in a post secondary setting or that he has demonstratable avocational or specialized skill." (University of Texas APL project)

With the introduction of this new alternative diploma in adult basic education a host of implications arise. Curricula and teaching materials based on APL objectives must be developed. Mini packages are being constructed which include the teaching activities helpful to complete the tasks, the teaching materials and equipment needed, the timing, sequence guidelines, and an applicable evaluation design.

New diagnostic, placement and assessment techniques are being developed. The tasks and competencies are clearly enough defined that testing and assessing can be quite accurate and progress measurable all along the line. This, in itself, is exciting and worth especially noting. Frequently, much that is taught in the traditional high school setting is not easily measured in terms of the student's ability to utilize the information in general living situations. The APL mini-packages are blocked in such a way that acquiring these competencies can be easily paced to the student's individualized needs, and even if the student's educational progress terminates before acquiring the external high school diploma, the general knowledge areas and skills already acquired can denote measurable competencies to employers and interested others.

Further implications occur in the area of staff development. New methods of instruction, new materials, and more importantly a whole new subject area must be presented to the teachers employed in the APL centers. In essence, present teaching staff may need to learn new "majors". Significant and "imparter of knowledge" no longer will be the most functional, but the role of resource person and instructional manager will, probably, take its place.

Not only may the APL program affect the role of the teacher, implications of change may also occur within the elementary and secondary school systems. In essence, if such a low functional competency is occurring in the adult population, then is not, perhaps, a change indicated in our whole education system, rather than waiting until adulthood to address those needs? In addition, implications occur at the junior college and senior college level. The criteria for admittance, may have to be altered to recognize the new subject areas. Will passing grades on such exams as the ACT and transcripts showing functional competencies be grounds for admittance - and how will these students fair against those receiving education from the more traditional curricula?

For those students occupationally bound, there is a need to inform potential employers as the APL External High School Diploma and what it means in terms of hiring. Perhaps, one that can function, in the practical sense, competently in our society may be a better risk than one that has a high school diploma, but little everyday skill training. This statement may be answered best in the future results rather than by speculation.

Recently, I heard a term used in discussing the new options in educational diplomas, "garbage pail" diplomas. It was meant in reference to watered down degress allowing credit in all kinds of things to the point that the original degree and the tasks accomplished to acquiring it meant little. The APL degree is based surely on a new type of taught subject. The degree given for APL skills is an actual high school diploms, not an equivalency certificate. The only difference appears to be the transcripts of courses attached to it differ from the traditional courses. If, in fact, a function of our secondary educational system is to produce functionally competent adults, and if this option is able to do so, then it could hardly be classified in the heap of "garbage pail" degrees although it's curricula not in the traditional vein.

The Adult Performance Level adult educational option is now beginning to be utilized. Whether it is a bandwagon program or becomes institutionalized remains to be seen. That it has helped educators to look at our present educational system, one that can turn out illiterates, and those that are functionally incompetent is in itself positive. I suspect that the APL Program and ones like it, may not only alter our educational system someday, but may revolutionize it at all levels. The whole purpose of education will be looked at. The philosophies of education surely will take on clear dimensions, as each school attempts to interpret the role of the educational system, idealistically and practically.

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